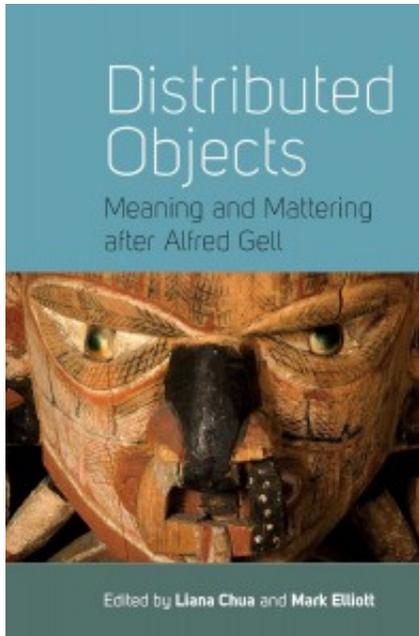# The Distributed Effects of Alfred Gell

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Book Review:

Distributed Objects: Meaning and Mattering after Alfred Gell.

Edited by Liana Chua and Mark Elliot

Berghahn Books (London & New York), 2013

By Fiona P. McDonald (University College London)

According to Georgina Born in [Distributed Objects: Meaning and Mattering after Alfred Gell](#), "we all have our own Alfred Gell" (p. 130). Therefore, I too must admit to having my own Alfred Gell—one more clearly understood to me after exploring an entire volume dedicated to what can best be summarized as profound scholarly reflections on the distributed effects of Alfred Gell's endeavor to

identify an anthropological theory of art in his *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (1998). *Distributed Objects* is a captivating pendant piece to Gell's original publication. It is not meant as a guidebook to understanding Gell's work; rather it is a collection of complex studies that capture distinct engagements with Gell's ideas around an anthropology of art. A sound understanding of (or at least an attempt at having read!) *Art and Agency* is suggested in order to fully appreciate the depth to which each chapter in this volume unpacks Gell's work.

Comprised of eight chapters—seven written by academics from Britain's leading institutions, plus one chapter by Gell himself—*Distributed Objects* represents a remarkable breath of engagement with Gell's *oeuvre* across a variety of disciplines. From anthropology, ethnomusicology and literary theory, to contemporary art, as well as performance, archaeology, material science, and art history, the scope of disciplinary expertise in this volume is extraordinary. The entire volume is book-ended by two overview texts. The first is the Introduction, where the editors Liana Chua and Mark Elliot contextualize their own understanding of Alfred Gell—a summation that eases both seasoned and novice readers through Gell's *oeuvre* and the density of research that follows throughout the volume. The final text drawing a close to *Distributed Objects* is by Nicholas Thomas, who presents a succinct Epilogue that is itself a truly distinguished review of this volume. It leaves the reader with a somewhat buoyant view when looking ahead to identify and understand future spaces where the distributed effects of Gell can be located within a museum context.

My review of *Distributed Objects* covers each chapter in the order as they appear in the volume, and includes brief comments that point to where each contributor's "own Alfred Gell" emerges from their interpretation, application, celebration, or critique of *Art and Agency*.

The genesis of *Distributed Objects* is traced back to November 15, 2008 and a symposium organized by the editors in Cambridge (UK), "Art and Agency: *Ten Years On*", which marked a decade after the publication of *Art and Agency*. Many of the contributors to *Distributed Objects* were also presenters at the symposium (Küchler, Gosden, Tanner, Born, Boutcher, and Hirsch). The conversation from this event is extended in this textual format with the addition of Alfred Gell's original version of "Network of Standard Stoppages" (1985) (published here for the first time in its entirety), along with a piece by Simon Dell that reflects on Gell's aforementioned chapter.

In the Introduction, "Adventures in the Art Nexus", Chua and Elliot frame the volume through a deft and comprehensive reflection on Gell's work in *Art and Agency*. To a novice reader of Gell, this sort of analysis is a useful reference as it exemplifies how each contribution will stand independently in an engaging conversation with or against ideas presented in *Art and Agency*. The editors claim that all of the chapters "feed into broader scholarly debates: the question of art, the notion of material agency and the very nature of anthropology" (p.11), and this ambition is achieved with great success. The entire volume creates a web of Gellian engagements and entanglements that are certainly not aimed at an idolization of Alfred Gell. *Distributed Objects* is a dense resource for scholars to experience discrete views and applications of Gell's ideas by those who have either

been enchanted or disenchanted by his ideas about agency and the definition of art and indexes.

The chapters begin with Susanne Küchler's (University College London) "Threads of Thought: Reflections on Art and Agency" (p.25-38), in which she draws Gell's work into an intriguing relationship with the work of seventeenth-century German philosopher, Gottfried Wilheld Leibniz. Kuechler states that Gell's work three centuries later brought Leibniz's idea of a "window-less monad" to the fore again as a means of "recovering the way images serve as the thread of thought, entangling expectations with experience in ways that root agency not in action, but in imagination" (p. 26). In Küchler's own *oeuvre* since working with Alfred Gell as a doctoral student, her understanding of Gell is based on a reading of *Art and Agency* as a "framework for a theory of the work things do as exponents of thought and as catalysts of imagination and intuition" (p. 25). Küchler's chapter is intricate, and her summary is a keen reflection on Gell's idea of 'least difference' where she takes the reader through an inclusive presentation of the influence of Gell's work by citing key ethnographic projects (Myers, Morphy, Hamby & Young), and then swiftly moves her reader into a discussion of neuroscience (p. 28). Küchler's chapter suggests in its conclusion that *Art and Agency* has enabled a current understanding of materials science as a domain "in which new fusions between thought and thing can be realized" beyond art (p. 36).

Moving from contextualizing Gell within new fields, Chris Gosden's (University of Oxford) application of Gell's many ideas about art and its agencies in his chapter "Technologies of Routine and Enchantment" opens up the application of *Art and Agency* into the domain of archaeology. Gosden argues at the outset that Gell's work offers "a set of analytical approaches to style and form which can be usefully extended to historical periods" (p. 39). And here is the where the running thread of time, to take-up Küchler's metaphor of thought around 'threads', starts to really present itself in *Distributed Objects*. Gosden considers *Art and Agency* as a whole divided into two parts—only to argue that it is the latter part of Gell's work that is most useful to his own "historical perspective on material culture" (p. 39-40), specifically when trying "to make a link between understandings of the world, social relations and material things" (p. 39-40). The value Gosden places on the importance of the final chapters of *Art and Agency* for his historical analysis is significant as it helps him to consider time in the equation of understanding "links of form and decoration" in relation to his primary research on Celtic art. Gosden's chapter is consistently rich with history, and his thick descriptions and analysis of metals and material histories of bronze and iron are no exceptions. The presentation of torc finds and Bronze Age socketed axes in England is meticulous and acts as a model for discussing the deep historical dimension and potential of applying Gell's ideas about indexes and the agentive potential of Celtic art objects as they are moved across time and place.

From the mobility of objects witnessed in the previous chapter, Jeremy Tanner (University College London) takes the reader into a comparative analysis of two cultural heritage sites in "Figuring out Death: Sculpture and Agency at the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus and the Tomb of the First Emperor of China" (p. 58-87). The comparative model is used to tease out an understanding of agency (or agencies) by focusing "on tombs as objects which are primarily concerned with the

extension of personhood beyond the confines of biological life" (p. 60). Here again, time presents itself but is not fully explored. Initially Tanner's chapter comes across as daunting given the distinctiveness of his two examples, but it is really quite a poetic engagement with *Art and Agency* as he accurately and actively applies Gell's terms to his own dense historical analysis of two disparate cultural heritage sites. By using his own version of Gellograms, Tanner presents the agentive qualities of both statues and images of a fourth Century Greek and third Century Chinese site. The end result of this comparative study is Tanner's conclusion that "Gell's vocabulary makes the art of the two monuments commensurable" (p. 81).

It could be argued that the next chapter by Alfred Gell himself is used as a natural pause in the volume. The editors reinsert Gell's own work from 1985, "The Network of Standard Stoppages" (p.88-113), by publishing it in its entirety for the first time. This work itself has taken many forms and an abridged version appeared as the concluding chapter of *Art and Agency.* In this current volume, however, it is strategically placed as a catalyst for the second half of *Distributed Objects,* which contains chapters that really critique Gell's work. This particular chapter by Gell, however, stands out in both publications as it captures Gell's own frustration with the "overriding rigidity of disciplinary boundaries" (p. 88). By looking specifically to the *oeuvre* of modernist artist Marcel Duchamp, Gell argues—and this is greatly simplified by turning to Born's words in this volume—that in the later works by Duchamp there are traces either found or "anticipated" in earlier works, and "how retentions of earlier works are found in later ones" (Born, 133). But while others take Gell to task for his reflections on Duchamp later in *Distributed Objects* (see both Born and Dell), there might actually be the kernel of lesson extracted from Gell's idea about the interconnection of past and present works in an *oeuvre* that the editors of *Distributed Objects* have quietly applied here to help readers appreciate this reality within Gell's own *oeuvre*. Therefore the protractions and retractions in Gell's own *oeuvre* are fundamentally what help those of us to find "our own Alfred Gell" in order to take his ideas across disciplinary boundaries. As Gell states, "it is only in conjunction with other works produced earlier, simultaneously, or later, that this or any other work in" a persons' *oeuvre*, even Gell's own, "reveals its meaning" (p.112).

Yet such meaning is arrived at through discipline-specific interpretations, and that is precisely the focus of Simon Dell's (University of East Anglia) chapter, "Gell's Duchamp/Duchamp's Gell" (p.114-129). This and Gell's chapter together read as a micro-conversation strategically placed as a pairing—something that sets their inclusion apart from the rest of the contributions in this volume and extraneous to the presentations at the 2008 symposium in Cambridge. Rather than using Gell's theories to illuminate an existing case study *per se*, Dell takes Gell as his case study in relation to art history to draw out the presence of time. Dell presents one of the most critical readings of Gell in this entire volume. Perhaps in wanting to see what Gell's theory can do for art history and network theory in general, what results is Dell somewhat dismantling and fundamentally disentangling Gell's exploration of Duchamp's *oeuvre* from an art historical perspective to suggest in the end that "[t]he anthropologist perhaps recognized as much in viewing Duchamp's *oeuvre* as a network; [that] it is also a net in which [Gell] is caught" (p. 126).

But through traps and entanglements, protraction and retentions, prototypes and indexes, and new understandings of social agency and objects, as well as the role of time, an unexpected critique of Gell emerges as Georgina Born (Oxford University) moves Gell's ideas in *Art and Agency* out of the intended context of visual analysis and into the realm of other forms of cultural production with an aural investigation through "Music: Ontology, Agency, Creativity" (p.130-154). In her complex discussion, Born identifies several ontologies of music in relation to nineteenth and twentieth century musical forms. Born reconciles for the reader her own ideas about agency as she locates them between Gell's earlier work in "The Network of Standard Stoppages" (1985) and his final words in *Art and Agency* (1998). Just as Küchler proposed that for her, *Art and Agency* might be "one of these key texts that mark the belated recognition of the material basis of the mind" (p. 36), Born shows that for her, *Art and Agency* might not actually cross all disciplinary boundaries; she suggests that Gell's removal of historical time to simplify his arguments has led to a "purification of [Gell's] thought [… that] entails a certain loss of analytical acumen" (p. 151).

Also applying Gell's ideas from *Art and Agency* to novel contexts, Warren Boutcher (University of London) is really the only contributor to *Distributed Objects* to explicitly point out that *Art and Agency* itself is an excellent "example of an index of a social relationship" (p. 155). Looking to books or literary art works as technologies of enchantment, Boutcher's chapter suggests that early modern books act "as residues of performances and agency in object form" (p. 155). Giving key examples from the sixteenth and seventeenth century, Boutcher's conclusion radically moves the reader to consider works in our own current historical moment by way of what he calls the "power of letters in contemporary media."

Time as a persistent thread in *Distributed Objects* finally gets due attention in Eric Hirsch's (Brunel University) chapter, "Art, Performance, and Time's Presence: Reflections on Temporality in Art and Agency" (p.176-200). As Hirsch states: "In this chapter I compare anthropological interpretations of Australian Aboriginal (Yolngu) and Melanesian (Fuyuge) artworks […], and incorporate into these comparisons art historical interpretations of artworks from different periods in Western art history" (p. 178). In essence, Hirsch takes up this intellectual exercise against Gell's work, and perhaps even art historical analysis in general, to show how the "dimension of time's presence" is not successfully addressed by any disciplinary approach. Deep in his presentation of his case studies (including a concise selection from Alpers (1983, 1989), Clark (1985), and Fried (1980) as art historical reference points), this challenging chapter requires one to intensely engage with Hirsch's argument in order to glimpse exactly where and how he realizes the presence of time.

The final word is left to Nicholas Thomas (Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge), who also wrote the noteworthy Foreword to *Art and Agency*, and who continues to be consistently provocative in his Epilogue to *Distributed Objects*. He states it best when noting that: "[n]o one could go from the stimulating arguments of this book with a sense that anything in or around the anthropology of art is settled" (p. 201). Thomas's own take-away from *Distributed Objects* is significant as he extends the application of *Art and Agency* into contemporary museum

anthropology and museum practice, and furthers the extent to which this volume has traced out the distributed effects of Alfred Gell.

The editors of *Distributed Objects* set up a great formula for a collective volume that responds to a previously published and highly regarded anthropological text. By not strictly forcing each chapter into a formulaic conversation with key points in *Art and Agency*, what results is a polyphony of arguments from across disciplines that complicates ones' engagement with Gell as it showcases the variety of ways that Gell can be approached, interpreted, presented, contested, understood, and adapted. *Distributed Objects* thus acts as a companion text and reference to my over-used copy of *Art and Agency*. For those moments when "my Alfred Gell" is troubling or confusing me, this volume can stand as a sounding board for new ideas—good, bad, and indifferent.

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